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PREPARATIONS FOR THE UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT ON THE BASIS OF GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION 44/228 AND TAKING INTO ACCOUNT OTHER RELEVANT GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTIONS: CROSS-SECTORAL ISSUES

Overview of Agenda 21 and implementation mechanisms

Report of the Secretary-General of the Conference

INTRODUCTION

1. In decision 3/2 the Preparatory Committee indicated the possibility that an overview of programmes and implementation mechanisms would be presented before describing the individual programmes which constitute Agenda 21. The present report provides an overview of the proposals for Agenda 21 being considered at the fourth session of the Preparatory Committee.

2. Humanity stands at a defining moment in its history. In one direction, a continuation of present policies will lead to a perpetuation of disparities between and within nations, a worsening of poverty, hunger, ill health and illiteracy, continuing deterioration of the ecosystems on which we depend for our well-being and growing threats to life on Earth. In another direction, if we change course, lies the prospect of improved living standards for all, more productive and better protected ecosystems and a safer, more prosperous future. No nation can achieve this on its own; but together, we can - in a global partnership for sustainable development.

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* A/CONF.151/PC/96.

3. This global partnership must rest on the premises of General Assembly resolution 44/228, which were accepted when the nations of the world called for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, and on the acceptance of the need to take a balanced and integrated approach to environment and development questions.

4. Agenda 21 seeks to give practical expression to this acceptance of a shared but differentiated responsibility for the future of humanity and its habitat and:

(a) Accepts people as the primary concern and agents of development;

(b) Recognizes the scale, depth and pace of change and seeks to increase the capacity to anticipate, respond and adapt to it;

(c) Focuses on linkages, particularly between environmental and developmental issues, and identifies programmes that address both sets of issues simultaneously;

(d) Addresses the forces that lead to environmental degradation, namely the unsustainable pattern of consumption, particularly in industrialized countries, the interrelationship between poverty and environmental degradation and the potential effects of demographic pressures;

(e) Respects differences in priorities and responsibilities, particularly between developed and developing countries;

(f) Recognizes that the responsibility for containing, reducing and eliminating global environmental damage must be borne by the countries causing such damage, must be in relation to the damage caused and must be in accordance with their respective capabilities and responsibility;

(g) Seeks to provide environmental space within available limits for accommodating developmental needs and raising living standards in the developing countries;

(h) Addresses the need of developing countries for new and additional financial resources and favourable access to environmentally sound technologies;

(i) Aims at a new era of effective international cooperation on environmental and developmental issues.

5. The action programmes included in Agenda 21 mark a beginning rather than a full expression of a new global partnership. They can be grouped around a series of themes/imperatives, each of which represents an important dimension of an overall strategy for a global transition.

6. The first theme is the revitalization of growth and development. Many people, particularly in the developing world, have been affected in recent

years by declining or stagnating incomes, deteriorating infrastructure, rising poverty and a gradual loss of resilience in the face of internal or external shocks. All of these failures of development need to be corrected if the other imperatives for the transition to sustainability are to be effectively implemented. Hence, a commitment to resolving the long-standing problems of trade, debt, development finance and related domestic policies are a key element in Agenda 21.

7. The underlying purpose of growth and development is to raise living standards, especially of the world's poor. A substantial reduction and ultimate eradication of poverty is vital even for environmental management, particularly in developing countries. Hence, Agenda 21 includes programmes which combine an anti-poverty and resource management orientation and aim at the provision of sustainable livelihoods for all. It includes programmes which focus on alternative livelihood opportunities in fragile ecosystems, as well as programmes which aim at meeting the essential needs of the world's poor for health care, education, drinking water, sanitation and shelter.

8. The overall level, pattern and distribution of consumption must be compatible with the capacities of the ecological systems of the Earth. Wasteful or excessive consumption, on the one hand, and a rising population, on the other, could, if unchecked, threaten the integrity of ecosystems at the local, national and global levels. A change in consumption patterns, particularly in industrialized countries, towards those that can be attained by all within the bounds of the ecologically possible has to be a central component in the drive for sustainable development. Along with this, demographic pressures have to be reduced and managed, not just for environmental ends, but for the beneficial effect that this could have on development prospects for poor countries and poor households. Both sets of issues are addressed in Agenda 21.

9. The quality of life depends critically on the physical, social and economic conditions in the villages, towns and cities in which people live. A breakdown of urban services and the spread of slums and violence spawned by rootlessness may well be the most immediate threats to human well-being in many countries. Hence, the management of human settlements in a manner that avoids these risks, by raising standards of shelter, sanitation and other services are an essential component of Agenda 21.

10. The demands that people make on resources are, in many cases, unsustainable in that these resources are already being depleted or degraded at a rapid rate. Changes in consumption patterns and possible reductions in demographic pressures could contribute to containing some of these demands. Nevertheless, it is essential that we find more efficient ways of using resources to fulfil our demands. We must manage resources for our use, not exhaust them. A large number of programmes in Agenda 21 deal with how to use land, water, energy and biotic resources in a manner that raises productivity and meets rising demands, yet conserves the resource base.

11. An important component of a strategy of resource management relates to strategies and institutional arrangements for ensuring the responsible and fair use of shared resources, particularly those which constitute global commons, like the atmosphere or the high seas. Regional and global conventions aimed at these ends need to be supported by appropriate programmatic initiatives. Agenda 21 includes many such programmes, particularly in the segments dealing with the atmosphere and oceans.

12. The processes of production necessarily generate waste. With rising production and the continuance of inappropriate consumption patterns, ecosystems at the local, national and global level could well be overwhelmed by the waste that they are required to absorb. Reducing waste generation, recycling wastes into productive activities, finding safe ways of disposing the wastes that remain and dealing with illegal trade in hazardous wastes are important components of Agenda 21.

13. The scale and depth of human interventions in natural systems is increasing rapidly. The need for cooperative arrangements for anticipating and managing these risks is reflected in several Agenda 21 programmes, particularly those dealing with biotechnology and with toxic chemicals.

14. The substantive programmes included in Agenda 21 seek to address developmental needs and environmental imperatives within an integrated framework. This integration of environment and development has to be reflected in a reorientation of attitudes, in changes in decision-making processes and in the data and information systems used for development and environment monitoring. Hence Agenda 21 includes proposals for strengthening the role of major producer groups, non-governmental organizations, local authorities and groups like women, youth and indigenous people who are often excluded from decision-making processes. It contains suggestions for methodological and procedural changes in decision-making. It puts forward a programme for the collection, processing and dissemination of relevant data and information, including proposals for environmental accounting. Taken together, all of these are aimed at placing issues of environment and development at the heart of decision-making at all levels and ensuring full participation in such decision-making by all who are affected.

15. The implementation of Agenda 21 will require a major transformation of technology in virtually all sectors. This need underlies several sectoral programmes that deal with science and technology cooperation and technology transfer. Agenda 21 also includes cross-sectoral programmes that deal with mechanisms for improving information about, and access to, environmentally sound technologies. The implementation of Agenda 21, both in its sectoral and cross-sectoral aspect, will require a substantial strengthening of technical expertise, institutions and legal systems in developing countries. A major initiative for this type of capacity-building in developing countries is a central element of Agenda 21.

16. The developmental and environmental objectives of Agenda 21 will require a substantial flow of new and additional financial resources to developing countries in order to cover the following:

(a) The resources required for accelerating development and making it environmentally sustainable;

(b) The incremental costs for the actions that developing countries have to undertake to deal with global environmental problems.

17. New and additional financial resources are also required for strengthening the capacity of international institutions for the implementation of Agenda 21.

18. Agenda 21 is a global partnership and the international institutional arrangements meant to support this must reflect the mutuality of interests and obligations.

19. Agenda 21 is a programme of action for a sustainable future for the human family and a first step towards ensuring that, within the lifetime of someone born today, the world will become a more just, secure and prosperous habitat for all of humanity.